

WOMEN ON WHEELS



Arvind Gupta
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Dedicated to P. Sainath -
Extraordinary People's Journalist

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from the Sir Ratan Tata Trust.

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Sheela Rani Chunkath

Sheela Rani Chunkath is a young, pro-poor, pro-women, dynamic lady IAS - District Collector of Pudukkottai. As the Chairperson of the District Literacy Society, she adds CYCLING to the literacy movement.

Vijaya



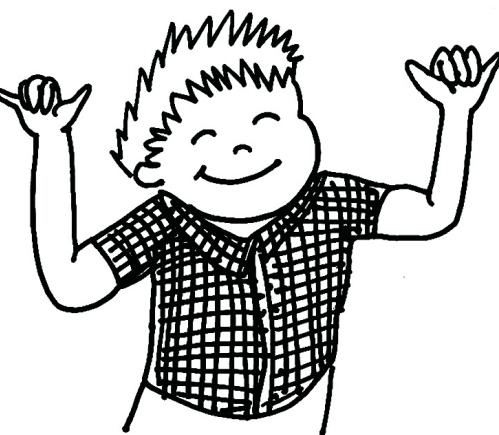
Vijaya is a fiery young woman. Poverty prevents her from completing her education. Determined and strong she stands up for what she thinks is right.



Amina

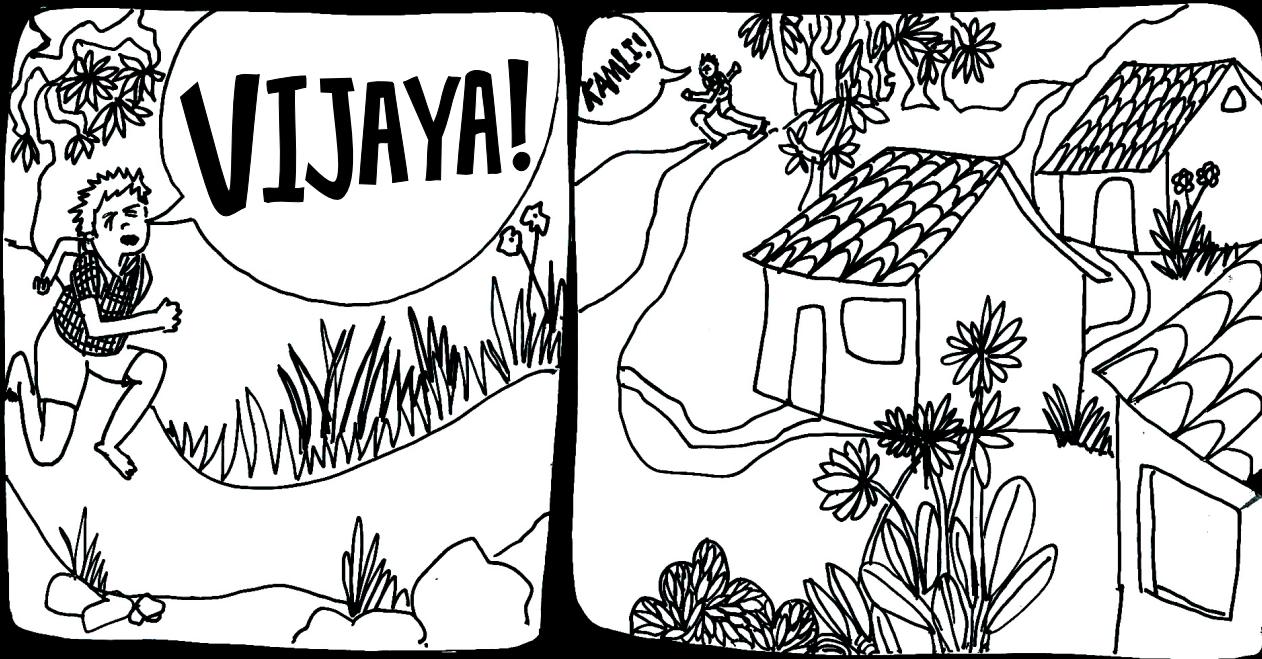
Amina is Vijaya's dear childhood friend. She is gutsy and resourceful. Married into a traditional family, she struggles to break her fetters to fly free.

Ravi



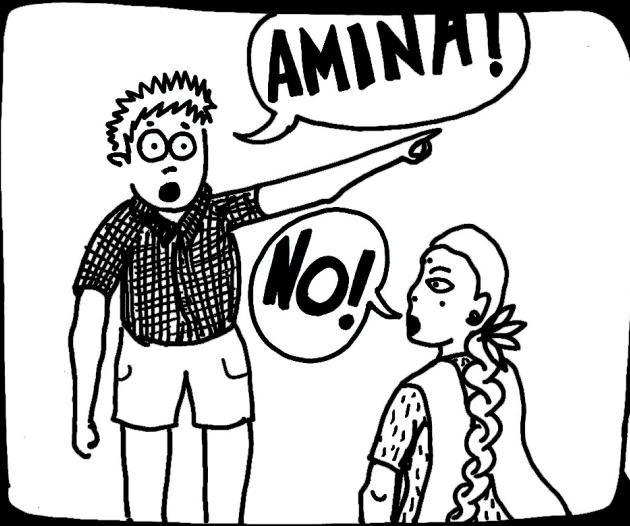
Ravi is Vijaya's younger brother. He is everyone's favourite mischief maker. He is curious and climbs every tree and wall to apprise himself of the latest happenings in Pudukkottai. He is a helping and lovable lad.

Our story begins in 1991. It was a warm summer morning in the District of Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu, India...

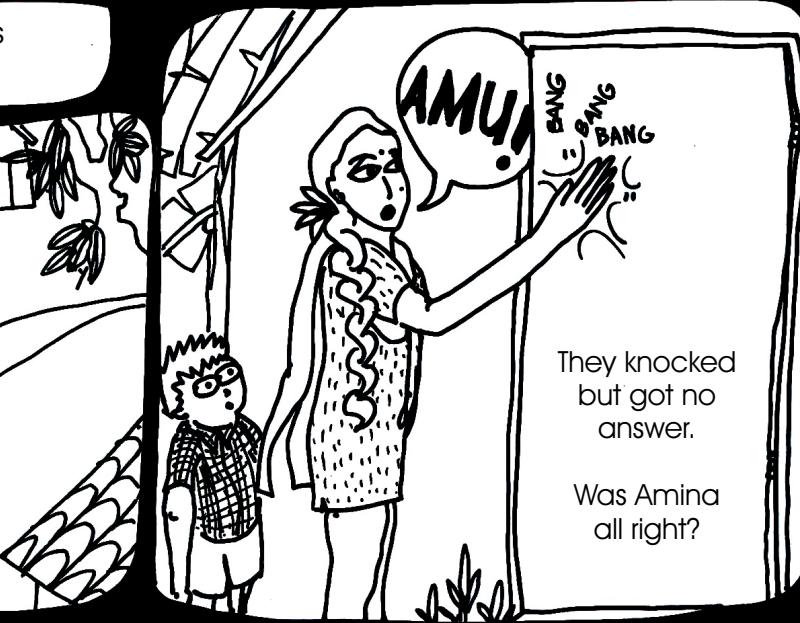


Ravi was Vijaya's younger brother. He was nine, and was always monkeying around. But Vijaya sensed something different today. Could it be an accident? Something seemed amiss.

Amina was Vijaya's friend.



Vijaya and Ravi rushed towards Amina's house.



Sex determination tests to find the sex of an unborn baby were widely prevalent in their district.

It was common to abort baby girls in the womb.

Vijaya understood the reasons in a flash.
Baby girls were unwanted!
Better to abort them in the womb!

HOSPITAL



Hope Amina and the baby are fine?
I pray for their safety and well-being.
No one should undergo such horror!



Vijaya cursed herself.
Could she have stopped the murder and saved the baby girl?



Come Ravi,
let's go home.
We'll come later.



As in most patriarchal societies, in Pudukkottai too, women's rights to equality, education and freedom were trampled on. Girl's education was low priority. Girls meant dowry and debt. Women earned less than men for the same work. They were the "unlucky" gender.

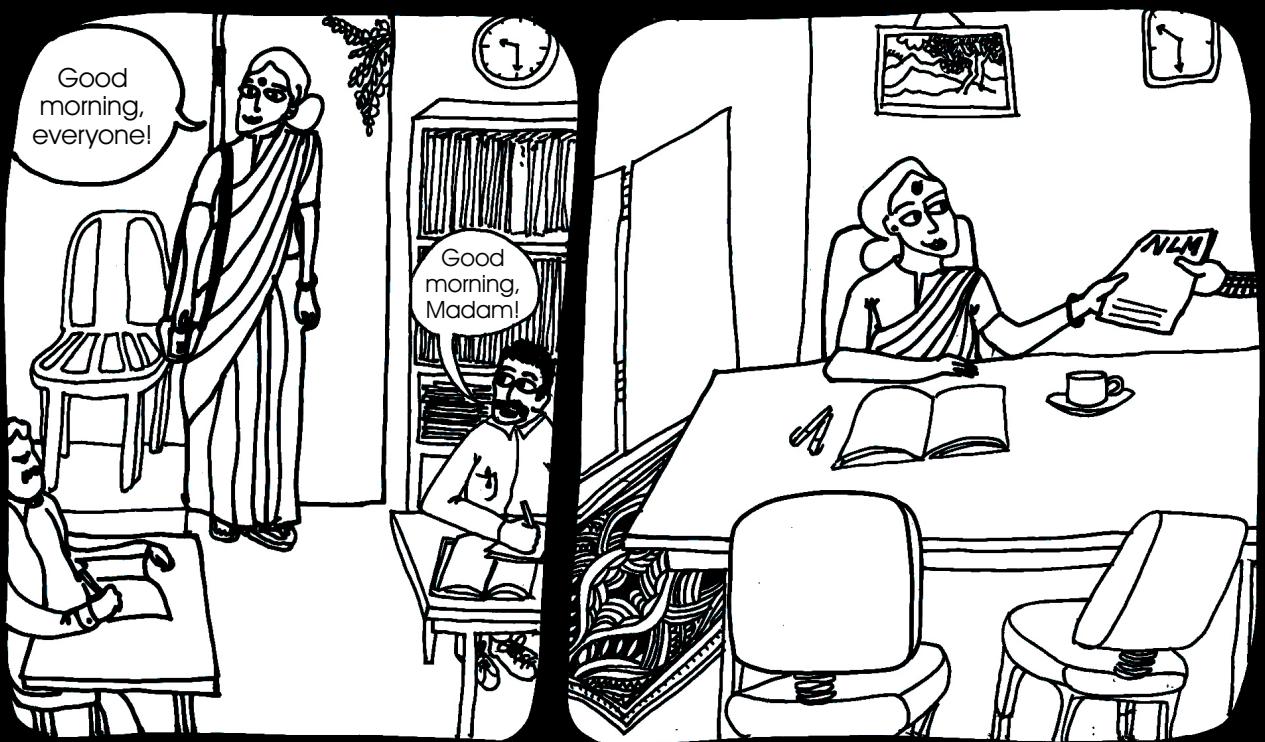
A girl's destiny was decided by men - father, brothers, and husband. From birth to death women lived a life of fear, and exploitation.



Vijaya pondered over these issues.
She dreamt of a just world which would
accord women their rightful place.
But not all was amiss.



A dynamic, lady officer Ms. Sheela Rani Chunkath had recently been appointed as the District Collector of Pudukkottai. As Chairperson of the District Literacy Society and in-charge of the National Literacy Mission (NLM) she had a tough task at hand. She had to make the literacy programme a success.



Even after many years of Independence India's literacy record remained dismal. It had the largest unschooled population in the world. Top down Government Adult Education classes ran largely on paper.

In the 1980's the Government involved Non-Government Organizations (NGO's) and People's Science Movements (PSM's) to imbue life in the literacy campaign.

Inspired by this the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS) replicated the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) in Pudukkottai.

Eminent educationist Dr. V. B. Athreya was the State coordinator of the BGVS.

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator who taught landless peasants and farm workers to read and write in just 30 days! The new primers were modelled on Freire's revolutionary pedagogy.

They mobilized volunteers, teachers and principals, Rotary, Lion's Club, Religious Groups and Bank Officers etc in this mission.

"B" was not for "Ball" but "Bonded Labour"
"M" was not for "Monkey" but "Moneylender"

As the new primers reflected the lives and struggles of the poor they became an instant hit and captured the imagination of the learners.

The BGVS found an able ally in Collector Sheela Rani. As a sensitive officer she cranked the government machinery to respond to the challenge.

Her slogan was:

Teach a boy and you make a man;
Teach a girl and you teach a generation

AKSHARA KERALAM
made Kerala the first fully literate state in 1991.

Sheela Rani added CYCLING to the 3Rs.



The District literacy survey results were shocking...



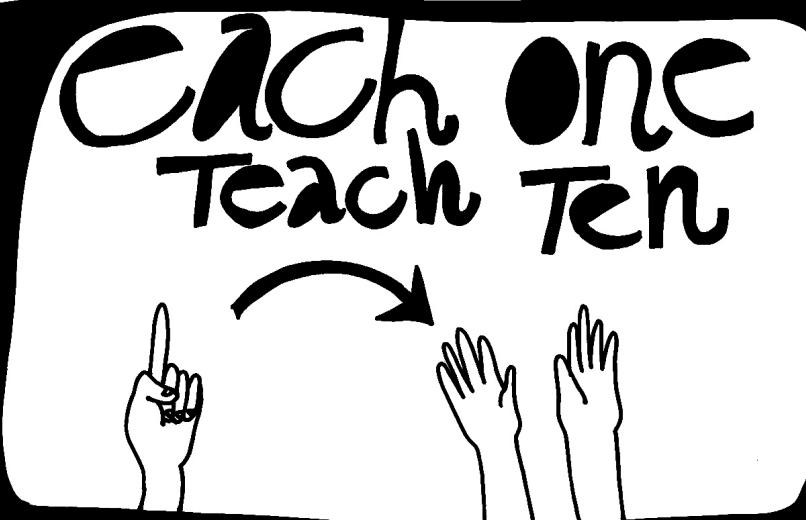
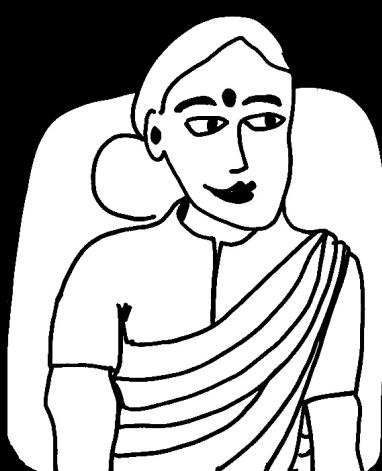
The BGVS showed that even in a non-revolutionary social milieu it was possible to carry out a mass literacy campaign. The innate goodness and volunteer spirit of people could be harnessed for a good cause.

Thus started - the **Light of Knowledge Movement** (ARIVOLI IYAKKAM) which cut across linguistic, caste, religious and other sectarian barriers.

Entire villages came out to support ARIVOLI activities. Songs, poems and impromptu speeches bubbled up from unschooled people.

Once the classes started in earnest the movement gained credibility. Word spread and more volunteers pitched in.

Their simple slogan was :
EACH ONE TEACH TEN



That evening as Vijaya and Ravi sat down to eat there was discomfort in the air.

None.
Could women in some way help in preventing such crimes?

Any news
Vijaya?

If Amina and I hadn't been pulled out of school, maybe such cruelties could have been prevented.

Our teacher used to say :
"Education has the power to transform your life".

Sorry, Vijaya.
How I wish you and Amina had completed school?

Amma-Appa did what they felt was right.

As women, we must accept our fate. It isn't an individual's fault.

But we must continue our struggles.

I'm glad you aren't sad
Vijaya!

That night, two women thought hard over the sad state of women.
But could they change the situation?

70% WOMEN ILLITERATE!

Women are in the pits!
Daughters get less to eat
compared to sons. Girls drop
out early from school to fetch
water, firewood; cook
food and take
care of siblings.

Why haven't
women found
strength to
organize
and fight for
their rights?

Girls are born to be subservient -
to obey orders and not to retort
even when injustice is
heaped on them.
Is it our fate?

Will things ever change?
Maybe, women will always
remain mute sufferers ...



....Our scriptures exalt
Durga and Kali. But
reality is very different.
In the real world,
women don't have
much say.
Men decide;
women meekly follow.
Women's
oppression will
remain the same.

Women of Pudukkottai
will benefit the most by
learning to read and write!
Education will open their
minds and give flight
to their imagination.
With education,
women will be
able to transform
their lives for
the better.

We will never
be
**STRONG
ENOUGH!**



We need to
make our
**WOMEN
STRONG!**

Next day, Sheela Rani called a meeting to discuss the finer nitty-gritties of the Literacy Campaign.

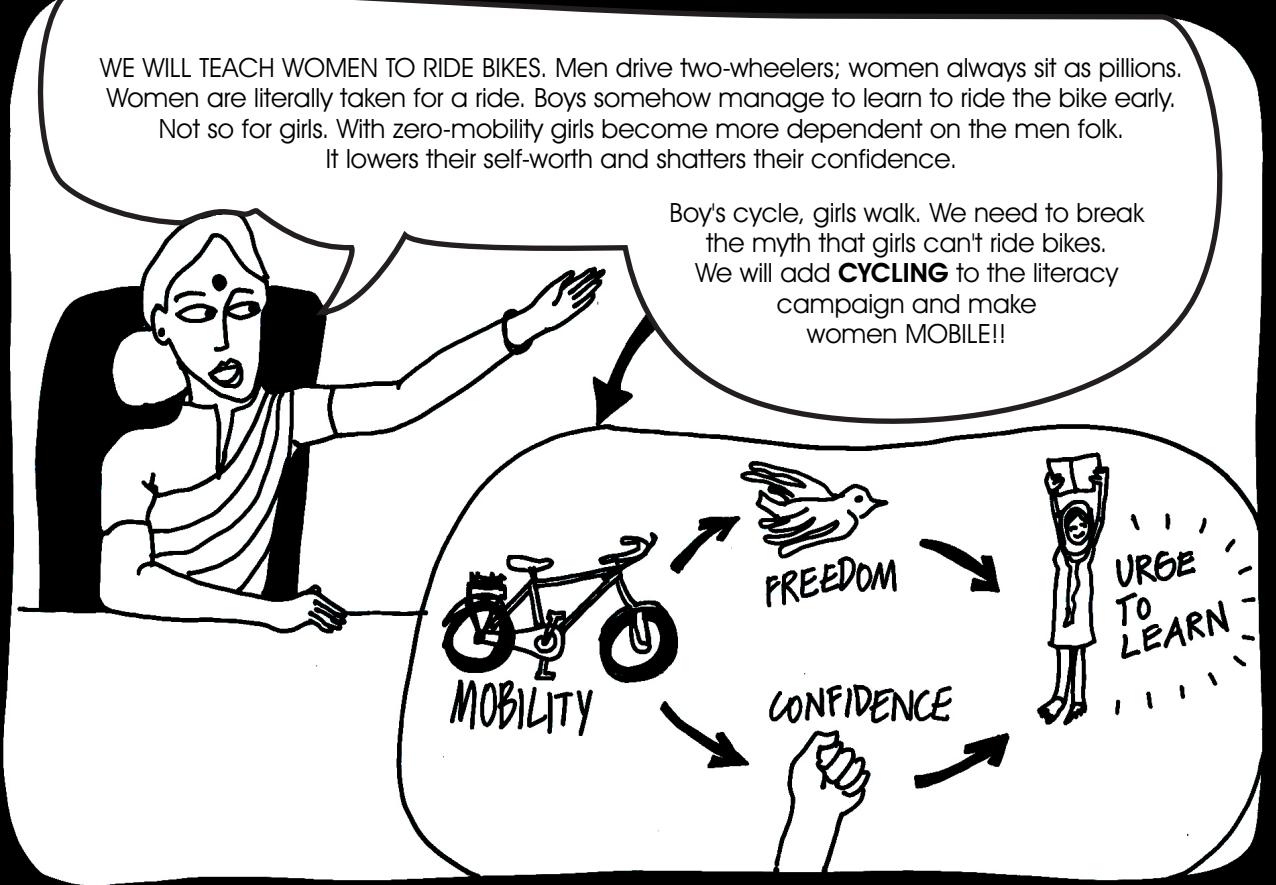
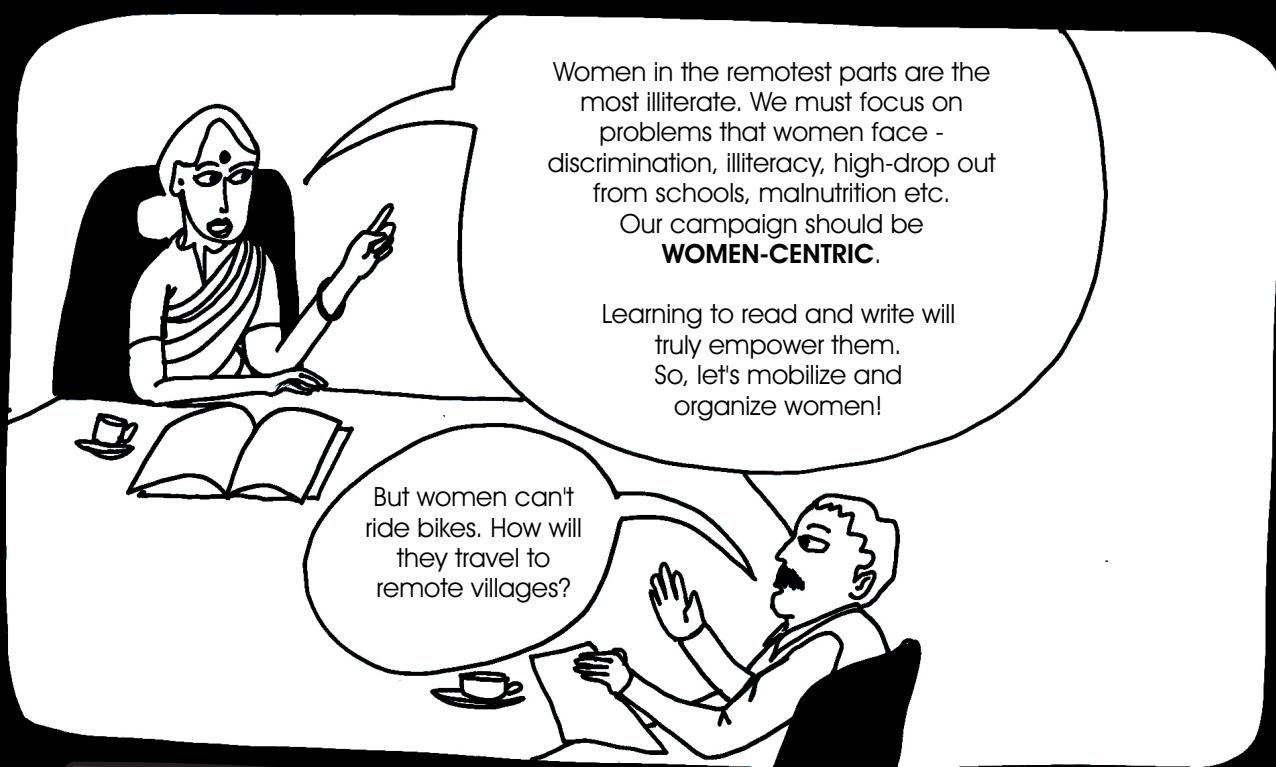
Madam,
the programme holds
good promise.

The BGVS has already laid the warp and weft - the basic foundation for the campaign.

But right now we need an army of motivated men and boys to kick-start the campaign.

I know the Headmaster of the Boys' school. I will ask him to send some senior boys to help. We will need a band of motivated volunteers to reach out to remote villages where illiteracy thrives.

We need to tap the creative energies of all sections of society. We must plan to minimize the drop-outs.





We will add **CYCLING** to the literacy campaign. Then women can fetch firewood and water on the carrier; and sell vegetables to get the best price. This will make them self-reliant.

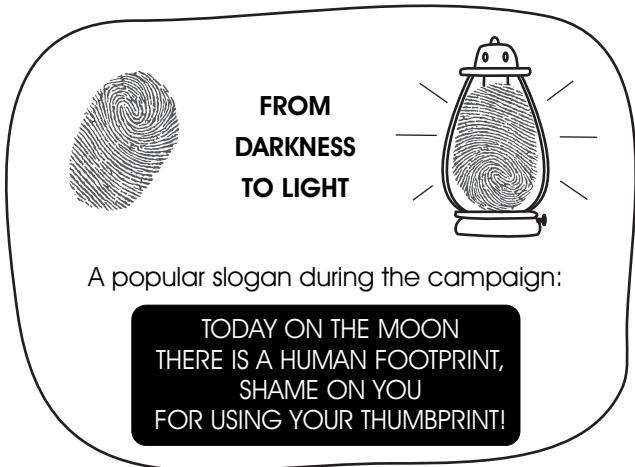
It will take time and a lot of struggle. But it is certainly worth trying.

Women of Pudukkottai will love to learn cycling. It will liberate them from the bondage of caste and class. The bicycles will add great fun to the literacy campaign.

The bicycle revolution took off with a **BANG!** Soon small girls, farm labourers, hardworking quarry women started cycling.

They were not just steering bikes - but their own destinies.





1. LITERACY



The success of the Total Literacy Programme (TLC) was based on:

1. Political commitment of policy makers.
2. Involvement of learners and community at large.
3. Spirit of volunteerism.
4. Suitable state infra-structure.
5. Flexibility in decision making.
6. A tight calendar.

2. NUMERACY

One woman quarry worker said:

"By learning to cycle, I have broken many barriers - gender, age, caste and class. It was unheard of for a woman from a poor *dalit* family like mine to even touch the cycle, let alone ride it through the streets. Now I can talk on equal terms with the contractors and even ride past them!"

3. FUNCTIONALITY

4. AWARENESS



In India,
the bicycle
has been the
VEHICLE OF THE MASSES.

People use the bike to carry sacks of grain, heaps of firewood, pots of water and barrels of milk. Often the entire family travels on the bike.

During the American Women's Liberation Movement the bicycle symbolized **INDEPENDENCE** and **FREEDOM**.

Bicycle is the most energy efficient form of transportation ever invented. It uses no fossil fuels, emits no noxious gases and leaves behind **NO CARBON FOOTPRINT**.

There is a car conspiracy. People are paid fat cheques to eat junk food in expensive joints to become obese. And then they fritter this money on gyms and health spas. So what they earn is soon snatched away.

For short distance travel there is nothing to beat the bike. No more waiting for crowded buses!

The bicycle is a multi-terrain vehicle. It can go through fields, dirt tracks and streams. The bike is your personal gym with **MINIMUM MAINTENANCE, MAXIMUM BENIFITS.**

With very few moving parts it is easy to fix. The bike is light enough to be lifted and carried on the shoulder in case of an emergency.

Soon literacy classes were held within 200-meters from a learner's house. Volunteers taught 10-15 learner's for 90-minutes at night, five-six times a week. The classes were held in homes, temple courtyards, mosques, cow sheds, under street lamps often huddling around kerosene wick bottles.

EACH ONE TEACH TEN +



ARIVOLI T YAKKAM:



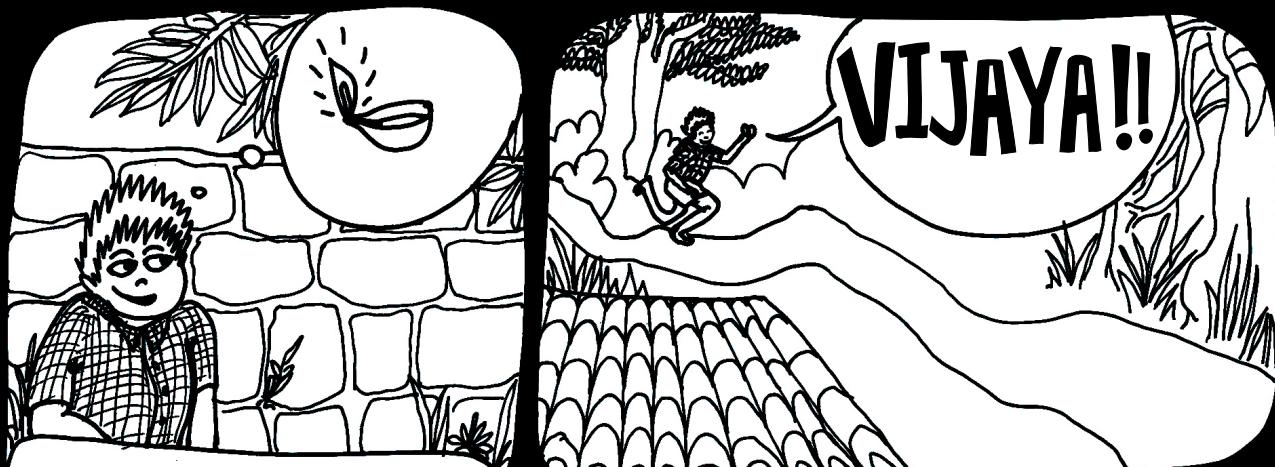
Vasantha - a neo-literate had this comment:

"I have become a compulsive reader. I read everything which comes my way - billboards and signs. I even read the newspaper in which my provisions are packed."

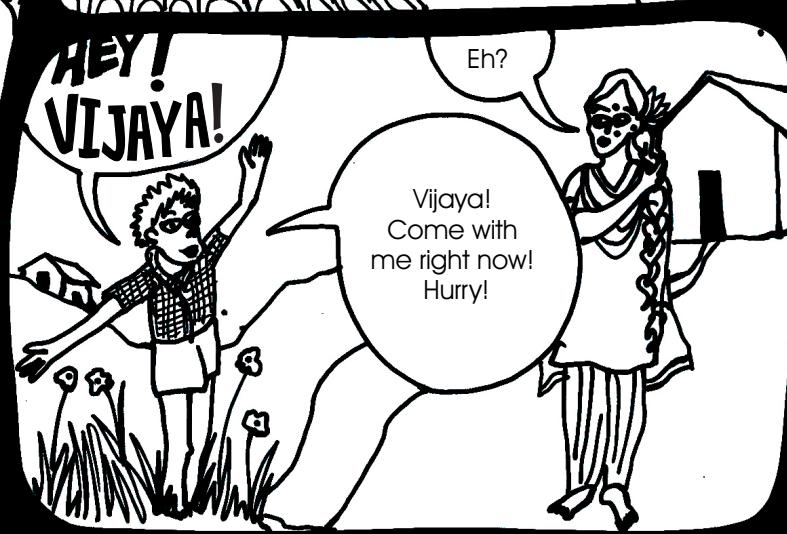




One morning, the literacy camp had a secret visitor. Ravi was peeping over the wall. He was thrilled to see so many women learning to read and write.



How nice!
Finally, there were classes for women!
Ravi had a twinkle in his eyes.
He would bring Vijaya here.
She'd be thrilled!





That very day, Vijaya joined
the literacy class.



Though she could read and write,
Vijaya enjoyed attending the classes.
But all the while she still thought of Amina.
How was her dear friend?

Soon many songs were composed in praise of cycling.

"Learn to ride the cycle sister,
Set in motion the wheel of life, sister.
Times have changed,
Now women drive, men sit on the carrier!"

Women were happy but not the men.
Women cyclists evoked many abusive responses from men.



Men felt their power slipping and got furious.
Why were women attempting such ridiculous things?

What hurt them most was that women were learning cycling without the men's help.



Men ridiculed women.
They jeered and poked fun at them.



But unmindful of these threats the women kept pedalling, spreading the message of mobility, empowerment and self-reliance.

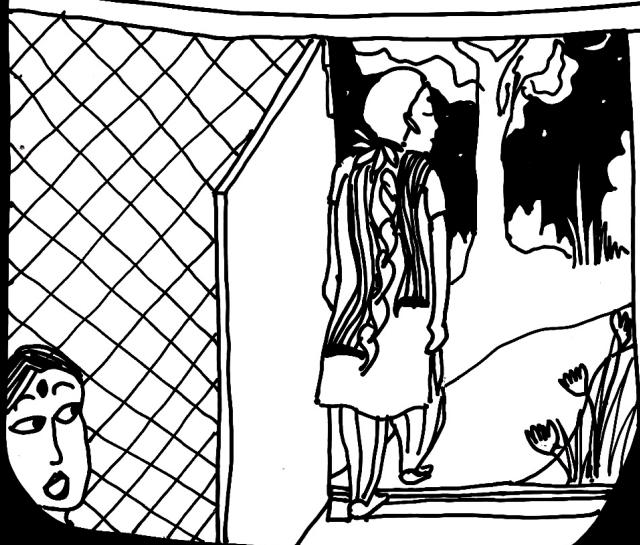


With so much animosity from men the volunteers decided to hold cycling classes at night. With fewer men jeering at night, cycling was more peaceful.



Vijaya, too, enrolled herself in a cycling camp. She did this secretly. However, one night, her mother spotted her slowly tiptoeing out of the house...

The women eagerly awaited the night lessons - without the men's barbs.



Vijaya's mother was horrified. All kinds of dreadful thoughts filled her mind. To ensure Vijaya's safety, she quietly followed her one night...



...and couldn't believe her eyes. Her shy daughter, Vijaya, was zipping around, on a **BICYCLE!** Her heart glowed as she walked back home.

Next morning,
at Vijaya's house -

Vijaya, there is something
I have been wanting
to talk to you.
You probably can help us.
I work in the stone quarry near
the lake. The contractor is
very exploitative.

Of course,
I'll do my
best!

What's it,
Amma?

Last week the contractor, called our
friend Senthil and forced him to put his
thumbprint on some paper. Senthil being
illiterate couldn't read the document.

He does not
even pay us
minimum
wages.

Now, that paper
makes Senthil
a bonded
labourer to
the contractor!

The contractor
treats him and
others like his
slaves!

Amma, you need to learn to
read and write to help them!

Yes, and
cycling too?
I know!

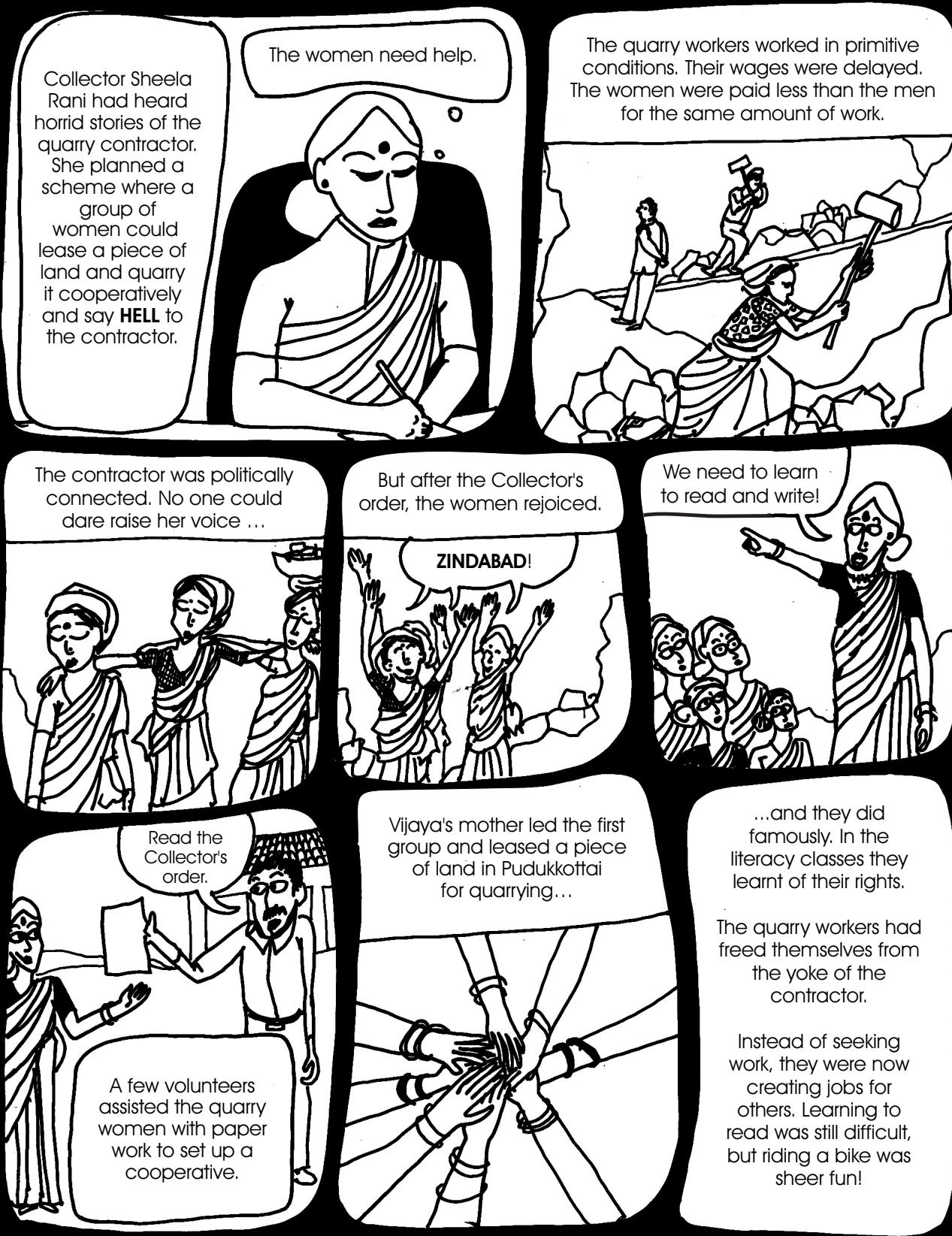
HOW?

I followed
you last night.
I was really
impressed.

You are
educated,
enlightened!

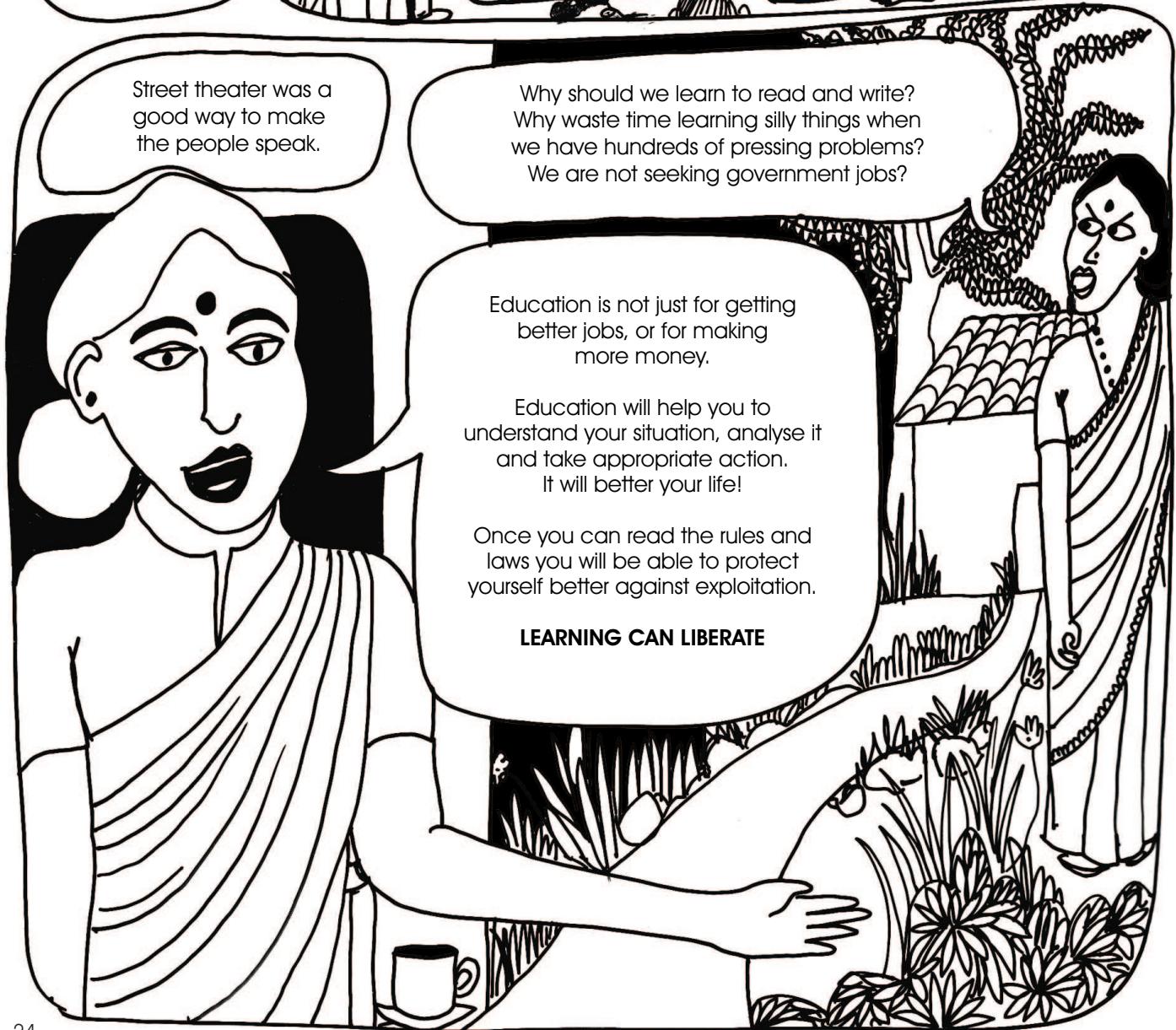
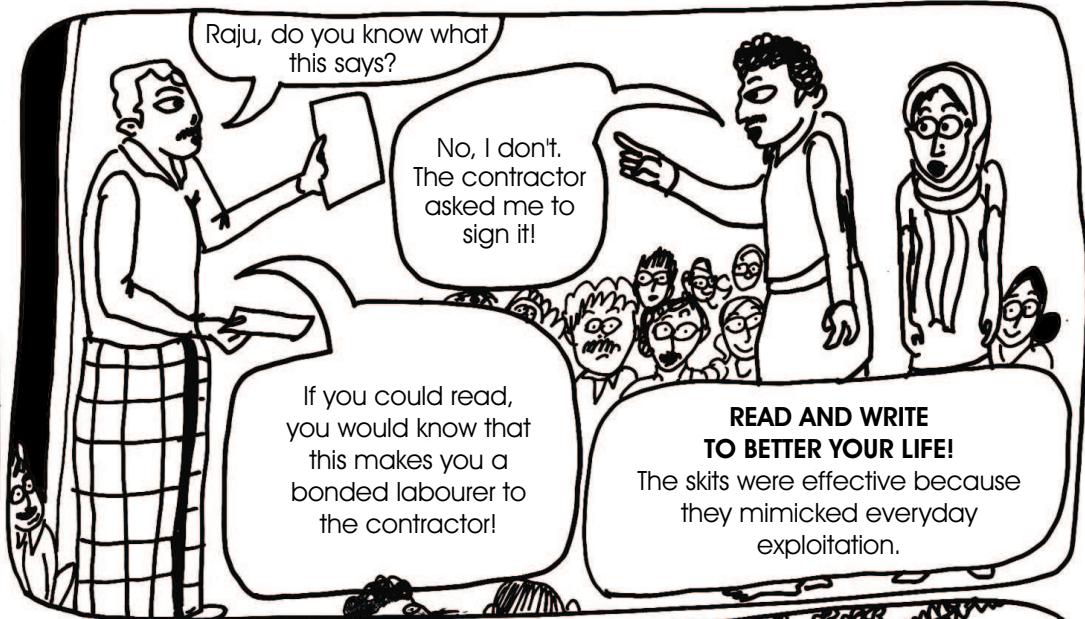
Thanks so much Amma! I thought you
will be upset. To be able to read
and write is almost magical!
I will take you there tomorrow.

And so, Vijaya's mother, too,
joined the brigade of new learners.



Many Muslim women were unable to read the letters their husbands sent from the Gulf. Under the plea of making them read the Koran, the women were sent to the literacy classes.

Street theatre was very effective in bringing the message of literacy. Skits, dramas were regularly performed to increase awareness.



Men simply couldn't stand the sight of women riding bikes. Soon the atmosphere became dangerous. Men disapproved of this freedom. The women were challenging their age old authority. How could they?

How dare she disobey me? Who does she think she is? She just can't zoom around on a bike like a hooligan!

It is time I give her a piece of my mind! What will the elders of the community say? A woman riding a bike all alone at night is awful. These shameful acts must stop!

What does she mean by "independence"? In fact, I myself drop her to the temple every day!

There was only one person who was delighted with the new cyclists. He was the lone bicycle seller in Pudukkottai Mr. R. Manjunath.

Why do women need to read and write? Don't their husbands work hard and bring home money?

Women must be independent! They must be able to move around on their own! It's the only way society will progress!

A slow transformation took place in Vijaya's home. Having tasted freedom Vijaya's mother was dying to try out new things.

I wanted to talk to him. Shall I wait until he finishes his meal?

Er... I wanted to ask you for something. It's special.

Alagumai? What is it that you want? Please tell me.

Vijaya's father was a wise man. He considered all options and then replied:

We can't afford a bicycle. There is Ravi's school fees, and we need money for Vijaya;s marriage! I am sorry.

Yes, I understand. We can't afford this luxury right now.

Despite continuous taunting and jeering the women kept pedalling.

Over **ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND** women learnt to cycle in Pudukkottai.

UNICEF was impressed by this feat and gifted 50 mopeds to village women health workers.

Finally, the wheel had started rolling for women!



N. Kannamal - Central Coordinator of the Total Literacy Campaign, in an emotional moment, said that being on the bike made her feel like **A PILOT IN FLIGHT!**

She composed a song:

BIKE I LIKE

I steer with the handle
And pedal with my feet
I can go long distance
Even in the heat.

Riding on the cycle
Is freedom, full of bliss
While dropping them to school
The children get a kiss!

Many women preferred the men's bike with the handlebar in the front where they could seat a child.

Slowly, the movement gained not only momentum, but also credibility.

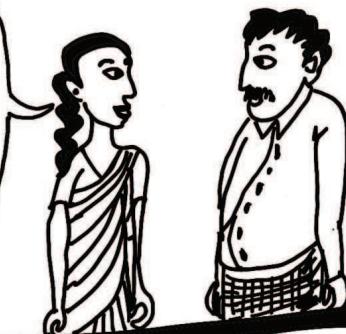
DISCOVERING JOY

Now I carry my children on the bike and show them the whole town! I can do more work in a shorter span of time!

I can sell vegetables far away and get a better price!



Since I started cycling, my husband has started treating me with respect and as an equal.



I need to finish my riding lessons fast, as my literacy class starts within an hour!



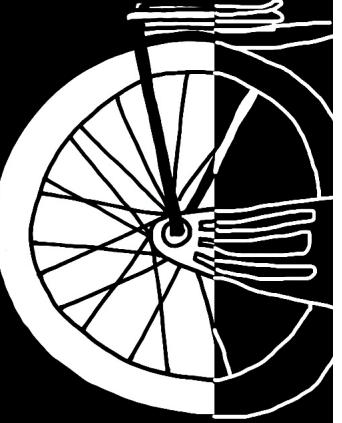
Will you take me there? I'd love to join too.

Soon, the literacy classes became synonymous with cycling. Some women came to the literacy classes straight from the cycling lessons...

Tell me more about the cycle lessons? Can anyone enrol? What is the fee? In childhood, my brothers would drive my father's cycle. I grew up thinking I couldn't learn cycling. But I have always been curious to learn.

CYCLING added a new dimension to literacy. And once the women's appetite was whetted they wanted more! Over a quarter of all rural women learnt cycling in a year!

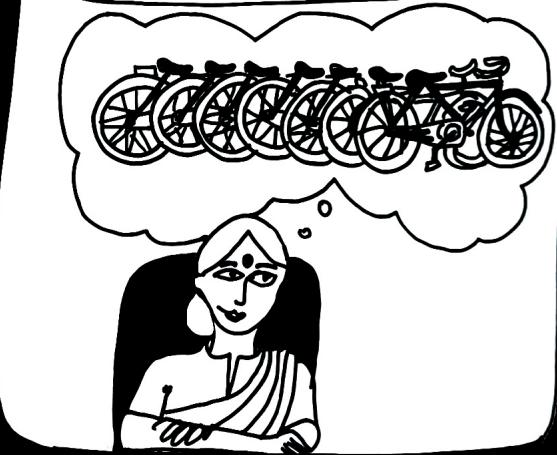
WE CAN'T AFFORD IT, BUT -



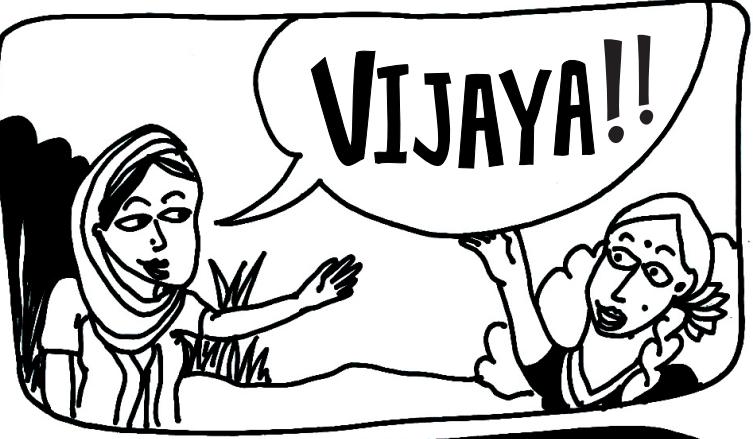
Many women couldn't afford to buy bikes. So, Manjunath's Bicycle Shop started renting bikes on an hourly basis. In the absence of women's bike they learnt cycling on men's bike. Women somehow managed the bike rent. They shared bikes and split rents.



Sheela Rani got many social organizations - Rotarians, Lions, Religious Groups and Trusts to donate bikes. She ordered banks to give loans for bikes. She asked manufacturers to rush more cycles to Pudukkottai.



Amidst all this joy, there was one person who was left behind. One afternoon, Vijaya spotted her old friend Amina in the market. She couldn't believe her eyes.



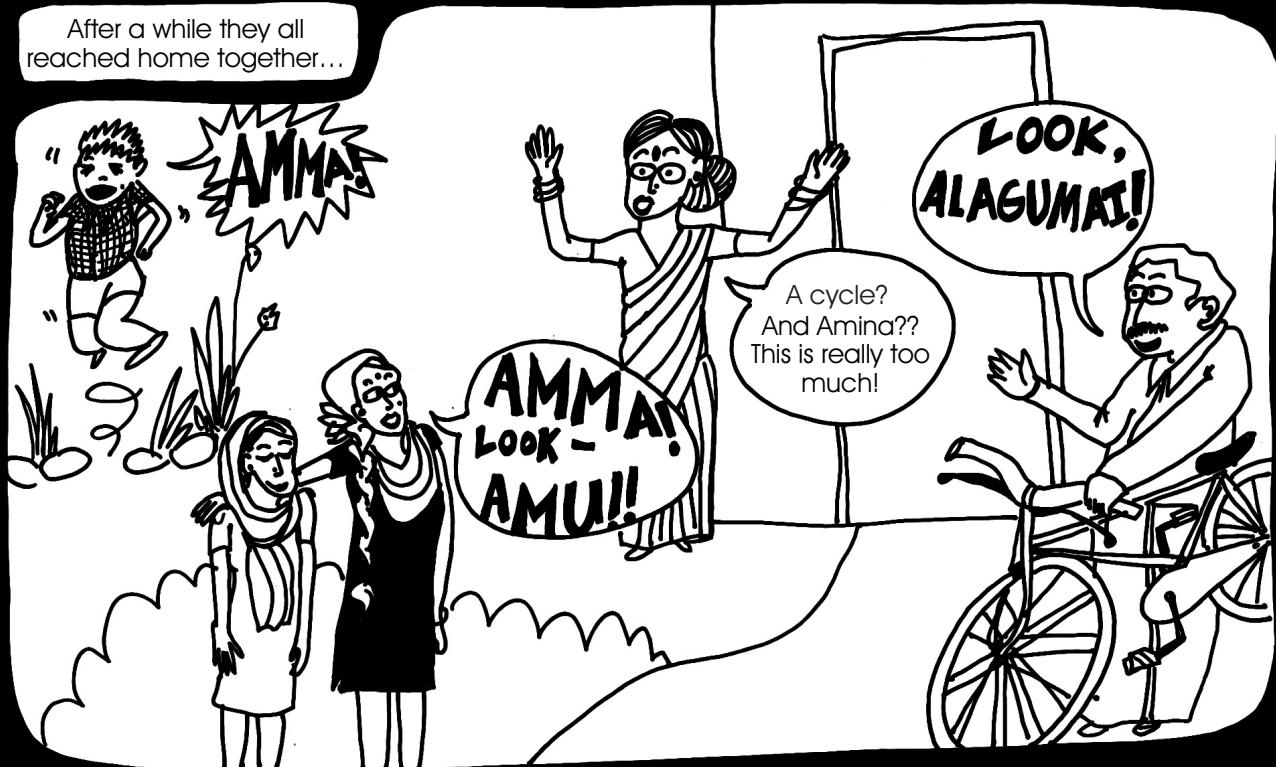
I am thrilled to see you.
Come, let's first go home,
and have some good food!
God, we've been terribly worried
about you!



Just then at Manjunath's Cycle Shop, Ravi spotted his father, deep in conversation with the shop owner.



After a while they all reached home together...

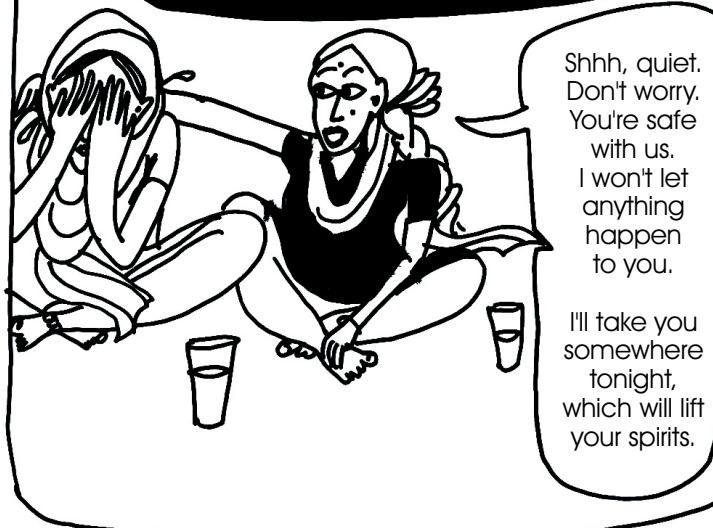


While Vijaya's mother admired the new cycle, Amina and Vijaya sat chatting.

Vijaya, it was horrible, staying with him. My husband desperately wanted a son. The day we got the ultrasound test report, he just dragged me to the hospital for the abortion.



God, Vijaya, I feel awful for what happened! That poor baby girl was killed for no fault of hers! I have been walking around the village like a zombie. I felt numb till I saw you, and then it all came rushing back. What do I do now, Vijaya?



WOW. **WELL DONE,
SAKINA!**

TRING!



Before being pulled out of school Amina had always been an ace student. Once again Amina felt a deep desire to learn.

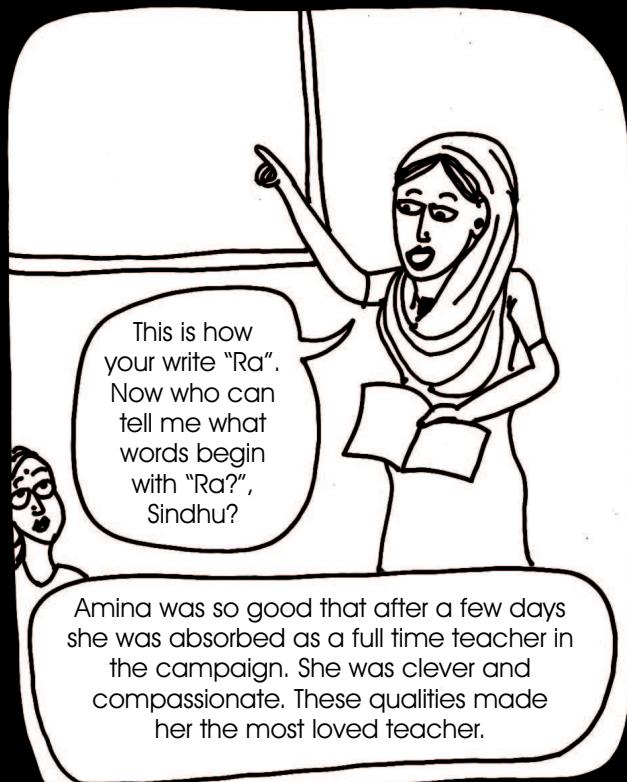
Amina, the National Literacy Mission is conducting both literacy classes and well as cycling lessons for all women in our District.

They call it the Total Literacy Campaign. I have joined these classes, and it's been a wonderful experience! It felt as if I was back in school, learning new things!

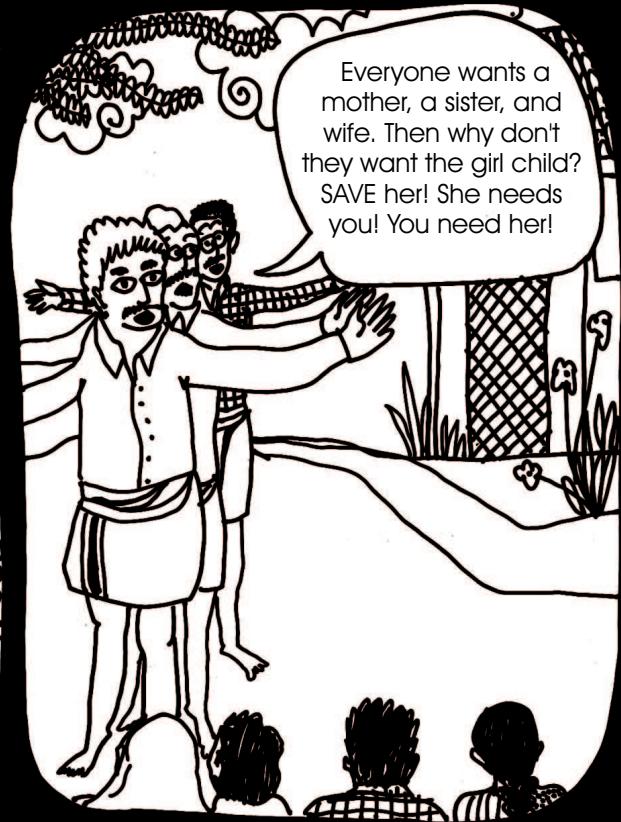
Such a thing has never happened before in our little town!

I would love to see these literacy classes. As I already know how to read and write, I would like to help out too!

That very week, Amina joined the classes. She was both learning and teaching. Soon, all her fatigue vanished.



Amina was so good that after a few days she was absorbed as a full time teacher in the campaign. She was clever and compassionate. These qualities made her the most loved teacher.



The mass struggle of women gave Amina the courage to speak against women's oppression. She became a full time social activist.

Sheela Rani epitomized an ideal pro-poor, pro-women government officer. In 2008, she won the Prime Minister's Award for the Best Administrator in India.

AMINA



SHEELA RANI



LET'S
GO!

Many cycle races were organised in which thousands of women participated.



THE BIKE BRIGADE
100,000
WOMEN ON WHEELS!

The women of Pudukkottai taught the world a lesson. Even in the most hopeless situation they found ways of hitting at their backwardness - of expressing defiance, and hammered at the fetters of bondage.

In 1991 an extraordinary and unprecedented experiment took place in Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu, India. As part of the National Literacy Mission more than ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND unlettered village women learnt not only to read and write but also to ride BICYCLES. Freedom and mobility for women on this scale was unheard of anywhere in the world. For the first time this inspiring story is being told in a captivating graphic novel.

Arvind Gupta is a science populariser and toymaker. He did a BTech from IIT Kanpur in 1975. He has received several honours, including the inaugural *National Award for Science Popularization amongst Children (1988)*, *Distinguished Alumnus Award of IIT, Kanpur (2000)*, *Indira Gandhi Award for Science Popularization (2008)* and the *Third World Academy of Science Award (2010)* for making science interesting for children. He shares his passion for books and toys through his popular website <http://arvindguptatoys.com>

Ishita Dharap is an artist and designer. She studied at the Shristi School of Art, Design and Technology and graduated with a Diploma in art and design in 2012. Since then, she has been freelancing as a graphic designer and illustrator, while also exhibiting her paintings at a local gallery. She is also involved in teaching, and studying ways in which play can be brought into the classroom. She lives and works in Pune and her work can be viewed at cargocollective.com/ishitadharap